

CRIME, FEAR OF CRIME AND CRIME PREVENTION: AN ANALYSIS AMONG THE RURAL ELDERLY



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CRIME, FEAR OF CRIME AND CRIME PREVENTION:
AN ANALYSIS AMONG THE RURAL ELDERLY

by

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INTRODUCTION

Rural society has experienced many changes in the twentieth century. Whether these changes are "good" or "bad" often depends upon the perspective of the individual. However, one change is perceived by nearly everyone as negative is the rising rate of rural crime.

This report is a summary of a larger statistical analysis of the impact of crime on the rural elderly prepared by the National Rural Crime Prevention Center and with the support of the Andrus Foundation of the American Association of Retired Persons. Research on rural crime, and more specifically, the effects of crime on older rural Americans, is very sparse. Hopefully, this report will stimulate additional research on the relationship between crime and aging in the rural environment, and encourage constructive program and policy solutions for redressing the negative impact of crime on rural people of all ages.

Two statewide rural victim studies conducted in Ohio during 1974 and 1980 comprise the primary data bases in examining the relationship between crime and older rural Americans. The basic objectives of the report are two-fold. The first is to measure the extent and impact of crime, especially its psychologic effects. The second major purpose is to examine empirically the level of crime prevention practiced by older rural persons in order to develop and recommend appropriate security programs and strategies for reducing crime risk and fear of crime. Throughout the analysis, the elderly will be compared with younger respondents from the two victim surveys. This will allow for a relative assessment of the problem, and put within a more complete context the specific prevention program needs of older rural Americans.

The Rural Elderly -- A Status Report

Population: It is noteworthy that 27 percent of the nation's 65 plus population lives in communities of less than 2,500 in population. An additional 13 percent live in towns of fewer than 10,000 persons.

There is a larger proportion of older persons in rural American society than in urban American society. In 1976 within metropolitan counties, persons 60 years and over represented 14.3 percent of the population. In non-metropolitan counties, this proportion was nearly 17 percent. Census information also reveals that in the nine primary census sub-regions of the United States, the proportion of the population 60 years and over is consistently greater in the non-metropolitan counties than in the metropolitan counties. Regionally, the West North Central and the East South Central states have the highest proportion of older persons to the total population

within non-metropolitan areas (19.4 percent and 19.3 percent respectively) (See Figure 1). The area with the lowest proportion of older person to the total non-metropolitan population are the Mountain States (13.8 percent). In the East North Central states, which includes Ohio, 16.7 percent of the non-metropolitan population is estimated as elderly.

Income: One of the most important variables affecting the well-being of older persons is income. Research has found that among factors affecting long term satisfaction with life, income clearly demonstrated the strongest relationship. Often, the consequences of low income among the elderly are inadequate nutrition and medical care. In addition, many elderly, especially those living in rural areas, are unable to properly maintain their dwelling place.

Income levels tend to decline with increasing age. This is due in part to the lower earning power of the older worker, and in part to retirement with fixed social security and pension payments. In addition, social security and pensions, two of the primary sources of retirement incomes, are often one-third or more below the wage of a worker during the last few years before retirement.

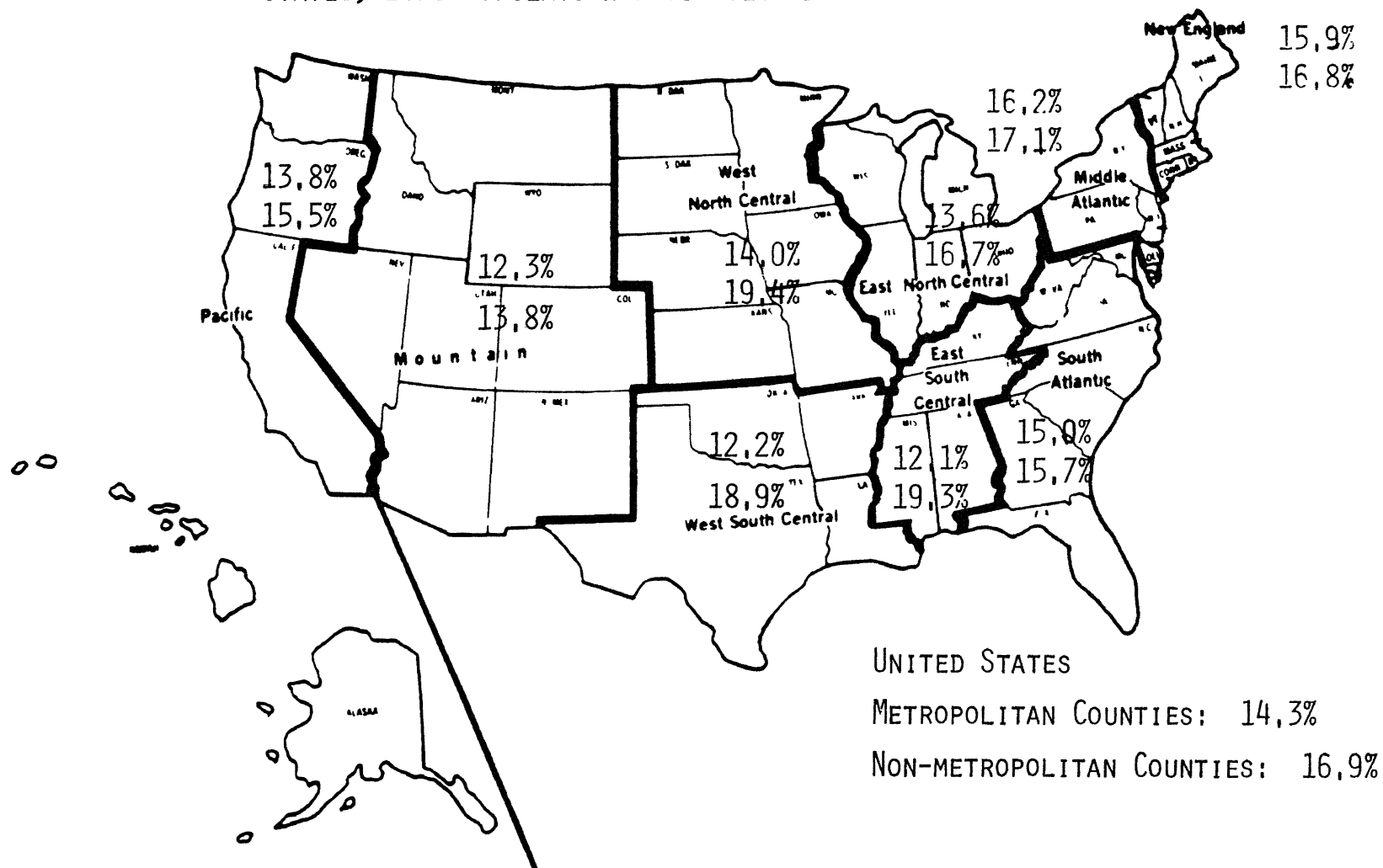
Census of population statistics for 1970 indicates that per capita income of older urban males was nearly 45 percent higher than older rural non-farm males and about 27 percent greater than older rural farm males. The differences were even more dramatic for rural women. Among the elderly, the per capita income of urban women was 76 percent greater than rural non-farm females, and 41 percent higher than rural females.

It should not be presumed, however, that all low income rural, as well as urban, elderly are dissatisfied with their life situation. Most research has found that older persons perceive their income as adequate to make ends meet.

The relationship between crime, the rural elderly, and income is important to examine. First, the loss of property due to theft or vandalism, or injury from violent crime, may cost more than an older person can afford. Second, many rural elderly possess items of great wealth, such as family heirlooms and antique furnishings, which may be attractive targets for thievery. In terms of life satisfaction, the inability to replace property, which may well have more sentimental than financial value, or to recover from serious physical injuries, means crime can be very detrimental to the older rural victim.

Housing: Generally, older persons spend more time at their place of residence than younger persons. With retirement, the need to commute to work is missing. Leaving home becomes more restricted to visiting, shopping, and some recreational activities.

FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF PERSONS 60 YEARS AND OLDER RESIDING IN METROPOLITAN (TOP) AND NON-METROPOLITAN (BOTTOM) AREAS, BY CENSUS REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES, 1976 POPULATION ESTIMATES (1)



(1) Source: 1976 Population Estimates: U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1978. The Elderly Population: Estimates by County, 1976. DHEW Publication No. (OHDS) 78-20248. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Therefore, the housing environment takes on greater psychological importance.

It is estimated that 15 percent of the substandard housing units in the United States were occupied by the rural elderly. Yet, objective conditions aside, nearly 90 percent of older rural persons were satisfied with their housing, according to gerontological research.

The relationship between housing, crime, and the rural elderly is important to examine for several reasons. First, because older persons are less likely to leave the home vacant, or to do so for shorter periods of time, their vulnerability to crime may be lower than younger rural persons. Second, the greater satisfaction with their housing environment may make older rural people more vulnerable to fear of victimization. Hearing or reading about a rash of home burglaries in a nearby county, for example, may cause the older person to be more fearful of loss or damage to household property. A third aspect of the relationship between housing, crime, and the rural elderly is that fear of victimization may result in the restriction of activities, as much as possible, to around the house or immediate neighborhood.

Sociability Patterns: Neighboring and visiting patterns is an extremely important part of the quality of life of the older person. The number of social contacts has decreased and the social world of most older persons has contracted.

Research often finds a discrepancy between objective and subjective indicators with reference to sociability patterns. Despite the loss of spouses, close relatives, friends, and neighbors of similar age, many older persons maintain an image of themselves as "not old" and even as "middle aged."

Rural areas of the United States are still noted for a greater preponderance of informal social relationships among its residents. Sometimes this phenomena is characterized as a natural helping network. This may be extremely important in understanding how fear, as well as actual victimization, may be reduced by utilizing the traditional helping systems existing in most rural communities. In turn, this will assist in the design and planning of appropriate and effective crime prevention programs for the rural elderly.

Data Collection Procedures

The setting for this study is rural Ohio. Rural Ohio is in many respects a microcosm of the nation's country areas. Its agriculture, its cultural diversity, and its ecological differences provide the many-sided settings for examining the behavior of the rural elderly related to crime.

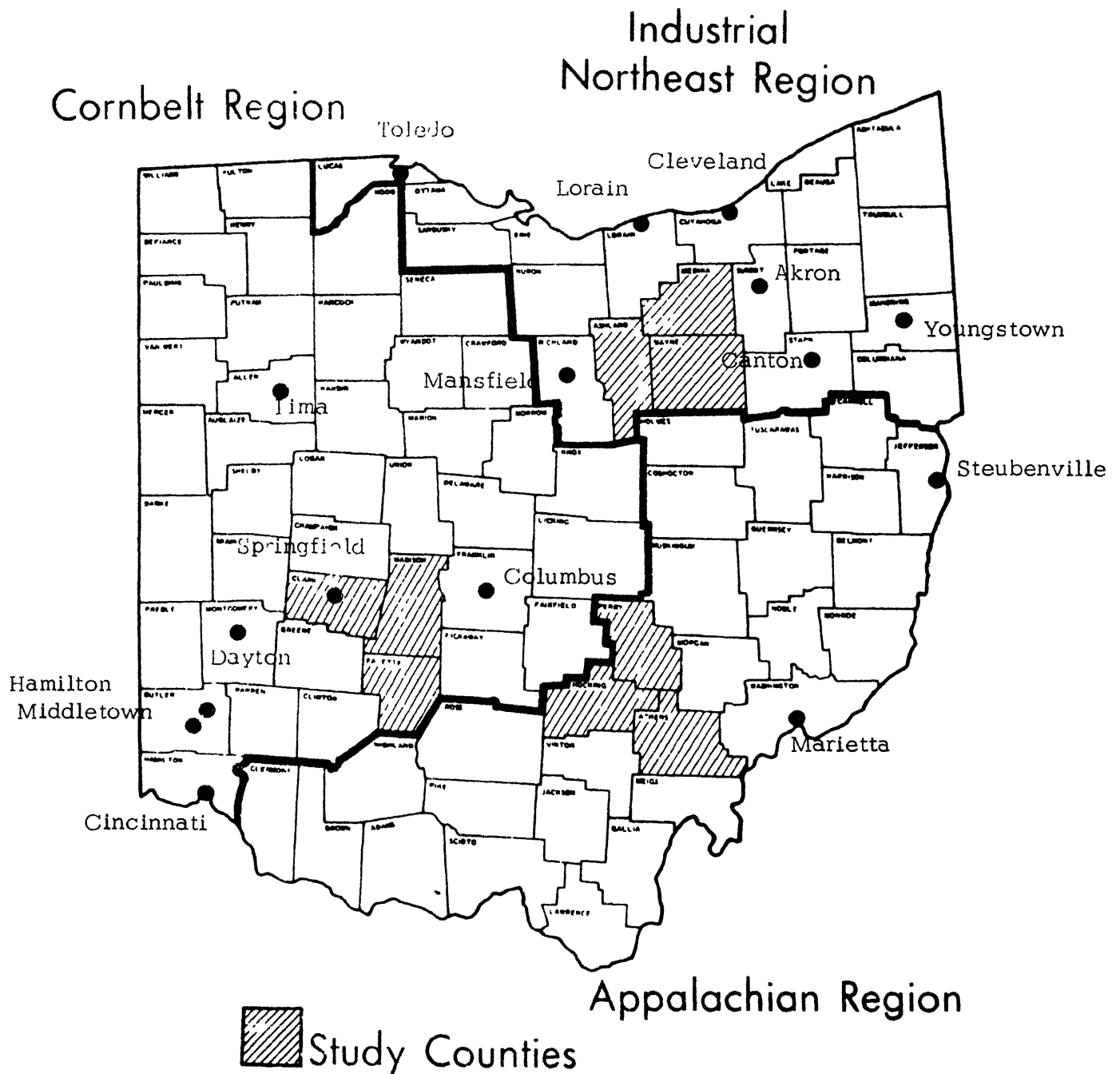


Figure 2. Three Geographical Regions of Ohio and Study Counties for 1974 and 1980 Rural Victim Studies

Ohio's rural areas can be categorized into three distinct regions. For identification purposes, they are called the Appalachian Region, the Cornbelt Region, and the Industrial Northeast Region. Figure 2 shows the counties by region and the sample counties from the 1974 and 1980 Ohio Rural Victim Studies.

The source of data for this study were two statewide victimization studies conducted in Ohio in 1974 and 1980. Both studies were undertaken in an effort to examine the nature and extent of crime committed against rural residents, as reported by the victims of the crimes.

Both victimization studies employed identical sampling procedures. Three counties per state sub-region were selected. According to region they were: Appalachia: Athens, Hocking, and Perry; Cornbelt: Clark, Fayette, and Madison; and Industrial Northeast: Ashland, Medina and Wayne (see Figure 2). It was desired that the counties in each region be adjacent so that patterns extending across county lines could be examined. The counties were selected on the basis of criteria including type of agriculture, topographical features, population density, distance from metropolitan areas, and proximity to interstate highways.

The sample was restricted to open country rural residents (i.e., persons residing outside of incorporated places). In order to obtain a random sample of open country dwellers, the following steps were employed. First, ten townships were randomly drawn from all townships in each of the nine counties. From a local map, an intersection of two roads was then randomly picked in each township. This became the starting point for a continuous type sample. Interviewers were instructed as to the direction to proceed and the households to be selected. Ten households per township were selected. Because of road arrangements and size of farms and residency tracts, additional interviews were required in both studies. For the 1974 study, three additional townships were selected in Clark, two, in Wayne, and one in Medina. In the 1980 study, two additional townships in Wayne, and one township each in Ashland, Athens, Hocking, Medina, and Perry were selected.

A total of 889 questionnaires were completed via the drop-off pick-up method in the 1974 study, and 891 in the 1980 study. Personal interviews were conducted in less than ten situations in each study, and only in cases where individuals requested assistance in reading or filling out the questionnaire. Residents were instructed to report only those incidents which had occurred during a twelve month period, August 1972-July 1974, and July 1, 1979-June 30, 1980.

Older households were defined as those with a head 60 years of age and older. For comparative purposes, younger households were designated as having a head 59 years or less. Approximately 180 (22 percent) of the households in the 1974 Ohio Rural Victim Study had a

head of household who was 60 years or older. In the 1980 Ohio Rural Victim Study, about 205 (25 percent) of the households had a head who was at least 60 years of age.

Findings

The major findings, from the 1974 and 1980 Ohio rural include the following:

1. Nearly one in five older rural households were annually victimized by at least one property crime incident, and another 1 to 2 percent by a violent crime incident.

1A. The most frequently occurring crimes to the rural elderly were vandalism, household larceny, and trespassing.

1B. There is very little difference between the vandalism rates of older households (11 percent in '74, and 14 percent in '80) and younger households (15 percent '74 and 16 percent in '80).

1C. For most other crime types, especially personal larceny and violent crime, younger rural households experienced higher rates of victimization. By crime type, the rates were as follows: household larceny--older households (not included in '74 and 5 percent in '80) versus young households (not included in '74 and 12 percent in '80); personal larceny--older persons (not included in '74 and 2 percent in '80) versus younger persons (not included in '74 and 7 percent in '80); burglary--older households (2 percent in '74 and 2 percent in '80) versus younger households (4 percent in '74 and 6 percent in '80); trespassing--older households (not included in '74 and 12 percent in '80) versus younger households (not included in '74 and 12 percent in '80); motor vehicle theft--older households (1 percent in '74 and 0 percent in '80) versus younger households (1 percent in '74 and 1 percent in '80); and violent crime (including robbery, assault--all forms, and threat)--older persons (1 percent in '74 and 1.5 percent in '80) versus younger persons (8 percent in '74 and 6 percent in '80).

1D. The temporal pattern of crime occurring to older rural households varied little from the pattern for younger households. Although the patterns varied from one type of incident to another, in general rural crime was spread throughout the year (with the least amount occurring during the winter months), took place during evening hours, and was more likely to occur on the weekend.

1E. About two-fifths of criminal incidents occurring to older rural households were reported to law enforcement. The proportion of incidents reported had declined slightly from 1974 to 1980 (from 42 percent to 40 percent).

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programs for the rural elderly should emphasize hardware that is low cost, easy to install, and convenient to operate.

#3 SPECIAL PROGRAMS DESIGNED TO REDUCE FEAR OF CRIME AMONG OLDER RURAL WOMEN SHOULD BE DEVELOPED

Older women were found to exhibit higher fear levels, both in 1974 and 1980. Their greater concern with crime is due to many factors: some are widows living alone and many may perceive themselves as physically unable to resist attack. Programs for older rural women should be designed to combat fear. In part, this can be achieved by emphasizing personal and property protection, and by some of the suggestions relative to perimeter security put forth under Recommendation #1. However, an added feature should be the encouragement of increasing interaction with others in the community through neighborhood watch, court watch, telephone-reassurance and similar strategies. The major philosophy behind crime prevention programs for rural women (and is likewise applicable to men and women of all ages) should be to emphasize those strategies which increase neighboring patterns (i.e., natural helping networks).

#4: CRIME PREVENTION PROGRAMS FOR THE RURAL ELDERLY SHOULD FOCUS ON THEIR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY-WIDE AGE-INTEGRATIVE STRATEGIES

It has been observed that many prevention programs for the elderly succeed in promoting security-conscious behavior, but fail to promote a sense of security in the participants that would allow them to live without the daily fear of being victimized. How can this latter problem be allayed? The logic for an answer is implied in the first three recommendations.

It appears that security consciousness is associated with concrete fear. Fear of actual victimization, being more realistic, appears more likely to encourage action. Hence, the emphasis of crime prevention should be on action, that is, those positive things that can be done directly with the participants.

Action-oriented crime prevention should by no means be restricted to property and personal protection strategies. Equally active (as well as integrative into the larger community) are neighborhood watch and good witness programs.

The elderly report to law enforcement a minority of incidents, and that this proportion has decreased overtime. In addition, there was a larger decrease among older than younger victims, despite a much larger increase in the proportion of younger victims. As a corollary to Recommendation #4, it is suggested that good witness programs be especially targeted to the rural elderly. This should be the major emphasis of programs stressing active participation.

Of importance, but slightly less so than the above corollary, is the following recommendation. Neighborhood watch type programs should be specifically targeted to older persons in rural areas, and should be used as a vehicle for increasing their frequency of interaction with other younger age groups. This recommendation is made on the assumption that more cohesive neighborhoods will be particularly useful in reducing levels of formless fear.

#5 CRIME PREVENTION PROGRAMS FOR THE RURAL ELDERLY SHOULD SEEK PARTICIPATION BY REFERENCE TO BASIC VALUES OF SAFETY AND LIVING IN A GOOD COMMUNITY

The results clearly demonstrate that actual property crime victimization does not increase fear levels. Using "horror" stories of victimization therefore will do very little to encourage security consciousness. As was noted earlier, that subjective satisfaction with income and housing had little in common with objective conditions among older persons. Depending upon a person's viewpoint, this discrepancy might be labeled stubbornness to confront reality, or resiliency against negative situational factors in order to maintain as positive a lifestyle as possible (i.e., a "stiff upper-lip"). More meaningful reference points may be to stress to the rural elderly the relationship between subjective well-being and safety. In other words, the very lack of a correlation between victimization and fear may be viewed as a positive point for the design of crime prevention programs. Hence, the desire to live a good life should be used by the designers of prevention programs for the rural elderly as a motivator in achieving increased security habits and adoption of security hardware.

One Final Note

The recommendations specified in this section may be summarized very simply. For older rural persons (and for all persons, young and old, rural and urban), there exists four major zones of security (see Figure 3). The referent point used to delineate these zones is the dwelling place, and this itself represents the first zone. Prevention programs for Zone 1 generally emphasize home security and personal protection strategies. A second zone, and one often neglected in the design of rural prevention programs, is the perimeter or boundary, that is, the immediate area between residences. This zone is far more relevant in the rural environment, but is equally relevant to the residential setting of many urban elderly. While there are dozens of fine examples of home security and good neighbor programs, there are few that have been developed for the area between dwelling places. The suggestions set forth in Recommendation #1 concerning vandalism, trespassing, and some forms of larceny are most salient to this zone.

The third zone is the immediate neighborhood in which the older rural person resides, and programs oriented at this level include the various types of neighborhood watch. Finally, the fourth zone is the rural community at large. Being a good witness and the encouragement of reporting incidents to law enforcement are programs appropriate at this level of security.

The overall strategy for the design of crime prevention programs oriented to the rural elderly should consider each zone as a security buffer intended to reduce opportunity and decrease feelings of insecurity. The 1974 and 1980 Ohio Rural Victim Studies have delineated several specific patterns of crime's impact on the rural elderly which have direct implications for program design. The authors encourage additional "action-oriented" research so that appropriate strategies are continually being refined.

FIGURE 3: ZONES OF SECURITY

